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JAMES ROY MacBEAN

Rossellini's Materialist Mise-en-Scène of *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV*

"The history of all human society, past and present, has been the history of class struggle."

—KARL MARX

"The basis of historical materialism is the concrete analysis of a concrete situation."

—V. I. LENIN

"Marx insisted on the prime importance of economic factors, of the social forces of production, and of applications of science as factors in historical change. His realist conception of history is gaining acceptance in academic circles remote from the party passions inflamed by other aspects of Marxism."

—V. GORDON CHILDE

The last quotation (from Childe's *Man Makes Himself*) seems to me to describe a position very similar to the one Rossellini has developed in his recent investigations into history. *The Iron Age*, *Socrates*, *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV*, and *Man's Struggle for Survival*, like the writings of historian Childe, evidence a very down-to-earth, commonsense materialist approach which focuses on economic conditions, the organizing of society in terms of economic functions, and the importance of technology in social change—all of which, as Childe points out, are keystones of Marx's analysis of history. But Rossellini is obviously no Marx or Lenin; and although I will contend that *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* is exemplary in providing "a concrete analysis of a concrete situation" and in bringing to the movie screen, for once, the depiction of class struggle as the motor of history, nonetheless I am well aware that Rossellini's public stance is to reject all labels and to refuse to draw any "political" consequences from his analysis of history. However, this public stance—and, in

particular, Rossellini's tendency to take refuge in the lame and discredited notion of "pure research"—strikes me as possibly disingenuous. In denying any political intentions, he speaks of the need to "demystify history" and to "get at simple facts" [see interview in *Film Culture* no. 52, Spring 1971]; but it hardly seems possible that he is unaware of the essentially political nature of the act of demystifying history.

Rossellini's *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* is not a film about Louis XIV. Rather, as the title (in the original French) clearly indicates, it is a film which examines the *taking of power* by Louis XIV. The film's principal focus, then, is not Louis himself, but the mechanism of power as understood and manipulated by Louis XIV.

The distinction is crucial, I think, for depending on the focus of investigation, one raises very different types of questions. Rossellini himself has revealed that each of his films is an attempt to answer a specific question: and he acknowledges that the question at the base of *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* was not "What was Louis like as a person?" but rather "Why did people at the court of Louis XIV dress the way they did?" An interesting question—and one which the film answers very clearly. But perhaps intelligence consists not so much in coming up with the right answers as in asking the right questions, that is questions which open up some fruitful lines of investigation by raising further questions. In the case of *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV*, for example, Rossellini's question about fashion styles may have served him as a point of departure; but the film as a whole is by no means limited to a dramatization of the answer that "fashion styles were deliberately set and cultivated by Louis XIV as part of an overall political strategy." On the contrary, per-

haps the greatest of this film's many merits is that Rossellini places the answer to his original question within the larger context of a clear materialist examination of the basic socio-economic situation of seventeenth-century France, and implicitly places the whole epoch within the ultimate context of the *process* of history itself.

To accomplish this, Rossellini resolutely avoids the crudely psychologizing interpretations and melodramatic structures of Hollywood's historical epics; and he rejects as well the lyrical excesses of Eisenstein's emotionalized reconstructions of historical events. Utilizing simple camera set-ups with very little movement of the camera, long takes, and a discreet but very effective use of the zoom lens, Rossellini maintains a cautious, alert distance from his historical material—thereby enabling us to experience, for once, the *strangeness* of a historical period that is not our own. This strangeness, however, is not to be confused with exoticism—especially the Cecil B. DeMille brand of exoticism where postcard images of “local color” (often Hollywood plastic) are shamelessly exploited, and every historical utterance is delivered with heavy-handed flailing by ham actors who dream of an Oscar.

Wisely, Rossellini relies primarily on non-actors in this film (Jean-Marie Patte, who plays Louis XIV, is a French Post Office functionary); and, preferring understatement to histrionics, Rossellini eschews the big scenes of emotional intensity that are the stock in trade of most historical films and lets us experience instead the subtle tensions of the daily, mundane deeds of history. And even when dramatizing the high points of Louis's *prise de pouvoir*—like the arrest of Fouquet—Rossellini evokes from Jean-Marie Patte a curious and penetrating sense of the dogged determination and single-minded effort involved in being (or playing) Louis XIV. Moreover, in close collaboration with historian Philippe Erlanger (who is credited with the script of this film), Rossellini brilliantly develops what I would call a *materialist mise-en-scène* in which *things*—the material objects of seventeenth-century France—are not mere props and backdrops for the drama, but share equal billing, as it were, with the human figures.

Rarely, if ever, has a work of art been so solidly rooted in *things*; and rarely, if ever, has an artist explored so vividly and yet so profoundly the rôle of *things* in the making of history. Significantly, the closest artistic antecedent I can think of for this film is Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*, a play in which the dynamics of history are also explored from a resolutely materialist point of view.

Rossellini's eye for detail in this film is masterful. But the details are not mere flourishes added on to the major dynamics of the film; on the contrary, it is largely through the details—the Cardinal's bedpan, the blood-letting, the King's morning toilet, the pastimes of the court, the preparing and serving of the King's dinner, and, of course, the all-important articles of clothing—that we begin to understand the way in which man's social existence is intimately tied to and strongly determined by his relationship to things.

But Rossellini examines as well the way in which man, starting with a concern for things, takes a detour—in his dealings with other men—into the world of *appearances*. “One rules more by appearances,” declares Louis XIV, “than by the way things really are” [*la nature profonde des choses*]. True enough, in one sense—and certainly the film documents the masterful manipulation of appearances that characterizes Louis XIV's reign. Nonetheless, that sophisticated web of appearances which Louis weaves around himself is by no means unrelated to “the way things really are.” Quite the contrary, it is part of an overall strategy to *change* “the way things really are” while diverting people's attentions from this material reality.

Along this detour from things to appearances, however, individual men and even whole classes may wander so far astray in the realm of appearances that they lose touch with the real world of things. But here we are anticipating: let's begin where the film begins.

In the shadow of an elegant chateau, the common people take a momentary pause in the morning's chores. There is news of relatives who have well-paying jobs in the service of the King. A cousin is off to Bordeaux to purchase the King's wine. The news is greeted with laughter

and that characteristically Gallic mélange of envy and sarcasm. "The King can't do without his wine, eh! So our cousin is the King's number-one winetaster; what a life!"

"The King, the King," interjects another, "in the end, he's just a master like any other. In England, they cut the head off a King, and there were no earthquakes or eclipses . . ."

"Don't complain," another interrupts, "if there were no kings, there'd be no palaces; and if there were no palaces, there'd be no work for us."

"Okay," chimes in another, "let's get back to work."

The point is worth emphasizing: *the film begins with the common people*. Not for reasons of plot, however. Granted, certain information is introduced—when the men comment on the doctors who pass by on horseback—about the illness of Cardinal Mazarin and the extended stay of the court at Vincennes. And this information then serves as a transition between the first sequence and the second, which shows the arrival of the doctors at Vincennes. But the information that Cardinal Mazarin is ill would be conveyed just as well if the film simply began at the second sequence: it is clearly secondary and incidental to the real function of the opening sequence, which is to examine the economic foundations and ideological overtones which enlist the common masses within the socio-economic system of the French monarchy.

One can even recognize, in this seemingly off-hand beginning, the basic elements of the ideology on which the aristocracy bases its rule: Divine Right (by this juncture in history, it is taken with a grain of salt—as evidenced by the "no earthquakes or eclipses" remark); and, more important, acceptance as a *given* of the notion that there could be no *work* other than within the existing economic system. The "no kings, no palaces, no palaces, no work" remark clearly demonstrates the strong carry-over into the seventeenth century of the feudal ideology in which economic relations are only thinkable in terms of control of the land (with the feudal manor—and, by extension, the royal palace—as the locus of control from which all work-oppor-

tunities emanate). This feudal ideology, we realize, is especially deep-rooted in an agricultural economy like that of France, where, in the seventeenth century, the working-class *per se* is still hardly distinct from the peasantry.

It surely is no mere coincidence—in a film which examines the mechanism of power—that the opening sequence should provide us with some indication of what factors enlisted the common masses within a given social system—particularly a system geared to provide such ridiculous extravagances for the aristocracy as is here the case. The "underprivileged classes" are talked about occasionally in the film (as objects to be manipulated and won over), and we often see them at work serving the nobility; but nowhere, except in the opening sequence, do we get any idea of *their* attitudes towards the existing social system and why they accept their menial status.

Finally, it is worth remarking that the opening sequence has a very distinctive nature: unlike all the other sequences of the film, it does not have its roots in actual deeds or words of historical figures. It does not reconstruct an event which, documentably, ever took place. The people are nameless; and their words—although they are of the sort that might have been spoken a hundred times a day—are purely the invention of Rossellini and scenarist Erlanger. Those words, however, perform an important analytical function. They may even be an answer to a question Rossellini might have posed: "How developed was the class-consciousness of the common masses?" In any case, this is a logical way to begin a materialist examination of a given historical situation.

Throughout the film, each successive sequence has a two-fold function in which information is presented to advance the chronological story-line and, at the same time, to analyze different aspects of the historical period. That the former is often less important than the latter, is illustrated best, I think, by the doctors' examination of the ailing Mazarin. In terms of story-line, this sequence is disproportionately long: all we really need to know is who Mazarin is (and the film doesn't really supply this

information until the following sequences) and not *how* he died but simply *that* he died. But Rossellini is interested in other aspects of history than merely "who did what."

So the doctors' examination of Mazarin becomes Rossellini's examination of the state of man's scientific knowledge in seventeenth century France. And what more telling index could there be of man's knowledge than his knowledge of his own *materiality*? The doctors take the patient's pulse . . . or roughly ten seconds worth. (In 1661—the year of Mazarin's death—the fact that blood circulates through our bodies was still a very recent discovery, the ramifications of which were only beginning to be understood.) They run their hands along the patient's nightshirt and bedding, then sniff their fingertips—presumably to evaluate the odor of the patient's sweat. Then they examine the . . . The word is not spoken, out of *délicatesse*; but the request is immediately understood, and the Cardinal's bedpan is quickly fetched from beneath the bed and handed to the chief consultant, who holds it up to his nose, shaking it gently

to stir up the contents, sniffing it in short, businesslike inhalations.

After several moments, he passes the bedpan to a colleague, accompanying this move with a telling arching of the eyebrows; and, turning to the Cardinal's resident physician, he concludes: "He must be bled." The other consultants quickly voice their agreement. Informed that the patient has already been bled several times that day and may be too weak to be bled again, they reply that "the human body contains 24 liters of blood and can lose 21 liters and still live." And to reassure the resident physician, they support their argument with analogies in the form of aphorisms: "The deeper you have to go to get water from a well, the better the water" and "The more milk a mother gives, the more milk she has to give."

The Cardinal is lifted from bed, placed in a chair, and bled from the ankle. As he faints, the blood is collected in a small pot. Repeating the same procedure as with the Cardinal's urine, the chief consultant grimaces resignedly: "Unless there's a miracle . . ."

Things
and
appearances:
17th-
century
science
(Brandon
Films)



Finally, the renowned physicians withdraw. Outside the Cardinal's chamber, they discuss several treatments that might be tried in desperation. "Perhaps His Eminence needs to be purged of his 'bad humeurs,'" suggests one doctor. "But I already gave him rhubarb," counters the resident physician. "Precious stones," suggests one; "A mother's milk," suggests another. But they admit they have never tried these measures and don't really have any faith in them. The scene ends.

Quite tangential to the film's story-line, this sequence is absolutely central to the film's basic preoccupations. The dialectic between objective and subjective factors, between things and man's perception of their appearances, is *mise en scène* in the Cardinal's deathchamber. The doctors recognize the importance of the material things of this life—like our bodies. But at this stage of history they can only examine what is externalized—like urine, sweat, blood, and the general outward appearance of the patient—and their basic tools are their senses of sight, smell, and touch. Their information is limited to sense data. They can smell the urine, but they cannot yet perform a chemical analysis of the urine. Sense data is a prerequisite and an important part of analysis, but, alone, it often does not accomplish very much. And while we concentrate on the outward appearances of things, things go their own way—they degenerate, decompose, and are transformed into something else. And when *we* are the things that degenerate, decompose, and are transformed into something else, all the other *things* that we accumulated in our lifetime are then passed on to someone else. We make out a will to determine who gets what.

Enter the Church. Mazarin—himself a Cardinal—is dying. He must be confessed and prepare himself for death. In the eyes of the Church, this means settling his accounts in the material world in order to enter the realm of the spirit. "Settling accounts" is a business term. Entering the realm of the spirit is a business deal. There is an entrance fee. The Church sends a business representative to hammer out the terms of the bargain.

Things and our perception of their appearances . . . matter and spirit . . . which is more important? Louis XIV might claim that "one rules more by appearances than by the way things really are"; but how true is this? The Church—any church—might claim that the spiritual realm is infinitely more important than the material realm; but how can this be reconciled with the Church's well-documented appetite for the material things of this world? Who is fooling whom? If material things are really so unimportant and insignificant, why do rulers and priests—throughout history—resort to such devious and complicated appearances to accumulate and control things? And since this film is an examination of the mechanism of power, what rôle does the Church play in the struggle for power? Isn't this, too, a question Rossellini is likely to have asked himself?

Enter Colbert. Briefly, the ailing Mazarin discusses with his assistant the affairs of government. Colbert tells of the state's depleting financial reserves and the flagrant corruption which permits ambitious individuals like Fouquet to fill their pockets at the state's expense. Colbert concludes with a warning that if Fouquet were to become Prime Minister, anything could happen.

Finally, enter Louis—or rather Louis *se lève*. Our first glimpse of Louis XIV is in bed. We, like the assembled nobles of the court, witness the opening of the bed-curtains and the morning ritual of a seventeenth-century monarch. It is quite a spectacle—complete with *esprit de vin* for the king to wash his hands and face with, prayers that are mumbled (for appearances' sake) to sound like Latin, an announcement by the young queen to the effect that the King performed his conjugal duty during the night, and, finally, the dressing of the king by his servants while the nobles of the court look on admiringly.

By introducing the figure of Louis XIV in this manner, Rosellini very skillfully suggests the purely *ceremonial* function of the young French monarch under Mazarin's regency. Like Cardinal Richelieu before him, Mazarin as Prime Minister is entrusted with the actual tasks of

governing, while the function of the French monarchy is now almost entirely symbolic. In the pomp and circumstance which surround His Royal Highness, the nation shall see the image of its greatness and prestige. Louis XIV, acutely sensitive to this public image, even refuses the dying Mazarin's generous bequest of his personal fortune—for "the public must never be able to say that a King received a fortune from a mere subject." (What the public doesn't know, however, doesn't hurt them—as we see later when Mazarin's fortune is *secretly* put at the disposal of Louis XIV, who, under these circumstances, has no hesitation about using it.)

But the 22-year-old Louis XIV has no intentions of remaining *only* a symbolic figure. In a conversation with the Queen Mother, Louis pours out his frustrations and very petulantly asserts his determination to change things. Power, he tells his mother, is shared by too many hands. The Parliament is getting too strong; it might get the idea of turning against its master. Louis fears the recurrence of the infamous *Fronde*—a rebellious coalition of bourgeois parliamentarians and dissident nobles who challenged the monarchy and ravaged French politics from 1648 to 1653, even forcing the royal family to flee Paris on several occasions.

The problem, Louis insists, is that the nobles of the court, living far from their lands, are in need of money and therefore turn to the bourgeoisie—putting themselves in debt at the hands of bourgeois creditors. "It's reached the point," he declares with disgust, "where *honneur* is for sale just like sugar or tobacco." "Power, today, equals *money*." Insisting that the selling of titles must cease, Louis sums up his aspirations: "What I want is that everyone should keep in his place!"

And the King's place, it is clear, is at the helm of his country, actively steering the ship of state. Everyone else—even his own mother—may be convinced that Louis is a self-indulgent, spoiled fop who will quickly tire of the responsibilities of government; but Louis XIV intends to fool them all and govern in his own right.

Slowly, painstakingly, with innumerable seemingly irrelevant details, Rossellini has drawn the

basic issues of Louis's rise to power. Now, the stage having been set, things move very quickly. Mazarin dies. Keeping abreast of the situation minute by minute, Louis quickly hurries to assert his power. A well-placed remark makes a calculated impression of Louis's determination to exercise power himself. Then, to assert his will, Louis goes against tradition and imposes full mourning—normally reserved for the royal family—to honor Mazarin. Further, he immediately calls an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers and stalks in brusquely to announce his intention of governing personally without the intermediary of a prime minister. Then, in private conference with Colbert—whom he appoints as his personal advisor—Louis inquires about the ambitions of the influential Fouquet, his Minister of Finance; and he carefully excludes from the Council meetings several individuals known to be closely associated with Fouquet—including his own mother and brother.

When the Queen Mother subsequently reproaches Louis for his ingratitude towards her and scolds him for his none too delicate flaunting of his affair with Louise de La Vallière, Louis dutifully implores her forgiveness and quickly hastens from the room as if overcome with remorse. As always, Rossellini's handling of this scene raises questions without imposing any heavy-handed answers. When Louis falls to his knees and buries his face in his mother's breast, the gesture seems quite natural. But the perfunctoriness of this gesture is highlighted by the quick exit which immediately follows; and, in any case, with Louis's face buried, we—like his mother—cannot see what emotions may or may not be expressed in his features and we thus have only the gesture itself and the seemingly fervent request for forgiveness to judge by. Is it just the appearance of remorse or the real thing? Perhaps we'll never know; or perhaps we should look elsewhere for clues. In any case, immediately following this encounter between Louis and the Queen Mother, Rossellini carefully inserts a brief but telling exchange between Colbert and Louis in which the King reiterates his insistence that neither his

mother nor his brother shall take part in Council meetings.

Brief glimpses of the court at play (at the country retreat at Chantilly) then reveal that far from reforming his promiscuity, Louis indulges himself ever more openly, in spite of his mother's disapproval and the increasing humiliation this brings to his wife Marie-Thérèse. And the love intrigues, it is clearly demonstrated, often become enmeshed in the political intrigues of ambitious nobles like Fouquet who try to buy over the confidence of the King's favorites.

Fouquet himself, this most dashing and ambitious figure whose prestige and flair rivalled that of the young monarch, is abruptly arrested by the captain of Louis's guard, D'Artagnan, in a move of calculated audacity. Planning the move with an eye to public opinion, Louis stages the arrest of his most powerful rival right in the man's own stronghold at Nantes—thereby accentuating the boldness of his action and the confidence he has in his own omnipotence. Rossellini subtly underscores the strategy of Louis XIV by having Louis tersely order that the arrest be shrouded in secrecy beforehand and announced with "as much stir as possible" afterwards. Even the Queen Mother—a close associate of Fouquet—can only respond to Louis's unexpected audacity with an awestruck "Louis, vous me faites peur!"

Having thus eliminated his chief potential rival, Louis sets about consolidating the power he has so assiduously acquired. And, as Rossellini suggests, it is the King's personal advisor, Colbert, who plays the pivotal rôle in devising and implementing Louis's long-range political program. Granted, the King himself dictates certain basic principles. "Each person must derive everything from the King, just as all of Nature derives everything from the sun . . . and the nobility must be kept separate from the bourgeoisie . . . these are the general goals of my policy." But Louis turns immediately to his confidential advisor and asks "What are the practical means of implementing them?"

Colbert, a bourgeois technocrat with a genius for organization, responds to the challenge with

a zealous, far-reaching program of economic reform and development that will reshape France from top to bottom. "Industries must be developed to enable us to produce for ourselves what we now must import from abroad; roads and canals must be built and maintained to facilitate commerce; we must build a fleet of ships to compete with Holland in trade with the New World; the lower classes must be taken off the 'dole,' it is dangerous for them to be idle, and we must provide public works to keep them busy; we must also reduce the tax burden of the most underprivileged classes, this way we'll win their allegiance and remove a source of discontent; on the other hand, we shall increase the indirect taxes which hit all classes of society—taxes on tobacco, alcohol, salt, etc.; and we should reduce interest rates on loans to cut the profits of the bourgeois money-lenders. . . ."

As Colbert systematically elaborates his proposals for reorganization, we cannot help but admire the foresight and thoroughness of this "bourgeois from Reims" (as Fouquet had contemptuously called him); and we may remark how fortunate it was for Louis XIV to have such a practical-minded man as Colbert for his chief advisor. But we begin to be aware, too, of a curious paradox involved in the collaboration of Louis XIV and Colbert—a paradox which becomes more evident in the session with Louis's tailor which follows, but which is already implicit here in the juxtaposition of Louis's ends with Colbert's means.

Louis's goals have an anachronistic, backward-looking quality about them. In desiring that "each person must derive all from the King," Louis seeks nothing other than a return to the central institution of the early feudal age, where the basic social contract was the sacred pact of personal indebtedness and devotion that bound each subject to the King. And just as the planets revolve around the sun in fixed orbits, Louis would have his subjects revolve around him in a clearly delimited hierarchy where "everyone would keep in his place." In short, Louis's ideals are the ideals of a feudal age long past. Even his attempt to restore the monarchy to active rule is an attempt to stem the tide of

history—as his mother has earlier in the film pointed out to him.

How strange it is, then, that the resolutely forward-looking proposals of Colbert should seem to fit in so well with the anachronistic ideals of Louis XIV. As the saying goes, politics makes strange bedfellows. But then so does history—and it is often only through the light of history that we can see how strange certain political alliances really were.

The brilliance of Rossellini's artistry, however, is that he knows how to visualize not just historical events themselves, but also the *internal contradictions* of a given historical situation. And here, in the meeting of minds between Louis XIV and Colbert, one of the primary internal contradictions of class struggle in seventeenth-century France is subtly brought to the fore. The bourgeois, practical-minded outlook (here personified by Colbert) is concerned with *things*; while the aristocratic spirit (here personified by Louis XIV) is excessively preoccupied with *appearances*. And although, as the session with the tailor indicates, Louis XIV is a masterful manipulator of appearances for political effect, nonetheless, he seems very limited in his ability to comprehend the economic (and ultimately political) consequences of the scheme he elaborates.

As Louis carefully specifies the number and placement of ruffles and feathers on the outlandish costume he intends to impose on the court, he explains to Colbert that these extravagant costumes will cost the nobles roughly one year's income apiece—thus bringing in a substantial income for the state treasury at the same time that the financial power of the potentially dissident nobles will be drained. Then, to placate the nobility and to keep them out of the hands of ambitious bourgeois creditors, Louis reveals that he will personally undertake—with funds from the state treasury—the housing and feeding of the court at the newly planned palace of Versailles.

Throughout this session with the tailor, Colbert keeps silent and lets Louis do all the talking. Louis's plan is so bold and Machiavellian in design that even its excesses are fascinating.

But the look on Colbert's face, so evidently cautious and skeptical, tends to highlight, by contrast, the inconsistencies and excesses of a scheme which financially entails giving back with one hand more money than the other hand just took in, and which requires that enormous sums of money be pumped continuously into an almost totally nonproductive sector of the economy. Through the stolid presence of Colbert, we begin to sense that while in the short run Louis's concern with appearances may seem to complement and reinforce Colbert's concern with things, in the long run the forces of history have them headed in two very different and conflicting directions.

And, in fact, it is perfectly clear from the perspective of history that Colbert's practical development of French industry and commerce served to accelerate the very patterns of social change—particularly the rise of the bourgeoisie—which Louis deplored and sought to reverse. Moreover, Louis's own policy of hosting the nobility at Versailles while ruining them financially eventually ruined the state's finances as well; and life at Louis's extravagant court, with its single-minded concern with appearances, so distracted the nobility from the material world of things (except as luxury items for conspicuous consumption) that by the end of Louis's reign this once-mighty economic class no longer played a vital rôle in the system of production and was, as Marx put it, reduced to a mere "parasite" in the new industrial and commercial economy dominated by the bourgeoisie.

All of this is simply implicit, however, as far as the film is concerned, for Rossellini traces only the ascendancy of Louis XIV from 1661 to the mid-1680's. Nevertheless, the film as a whole, and particularly the later sequences dealing with Versailles, suggest quite clearly that despite the flamboyance of Louis's court, his reign is by no means a healthy, fruitful flowering of the French monarchy. Rather, it is simply the last flowering—dazzling in its sickly hues—of a dying plant artificially kept alive in a hothouse.

And what a hothouse! Louis instructs his chief architect, Le Vau, to build Versailles large

enough to accommodate 15,000 guests. Versailles is to be the showcase of his reign—and, after his death, the temple of his glory. And at this moment, in a magnificent long shot of the construction in progress, Rossellini reveals the simultaneous *splendeur* and *misère* of Louis's grandiose conception. Seen from a distance, countless laborers scurry about like so many ants, their backs glistening with sweat as they strain under the enormous stone blocks which are cut, measured, and endlessly fitted into place. And for what? The way the shot is framed, it is hard to tell just what they are building. We know, of course, that it is the palace of Versailles; but—aside from a small arch in the foreground—it might just as well be the pyramids at Giza or the temples of Babylon. There are historical variations, to be sure; but it's the same old story: the privileged few live in lavish luxury, while the impoverished masses are forced to bear the burden, giving their lives to build the tombs and palaces of the rich. The shot is held only a few seconds, but it seems like an eternity, so powerful is the moral impact of this image of man's injustice.

Finally, the scene shifts and we jump ahead to the completed palace of Versailles, where Louis imposes his will unabashedly, gradually transforming the ceremonial functions of the court into a quasi-religious cult over which he presides as the living incarnation of the divine. Louis XIV becomes the "Sun-King"; all eyes are focused upon him, and every glance or word which he deigns to address to one or another of his subjects is a life-giving ray of sunlight.

Absolutely faithful in each detail, Rossellini depicts the daily ritual of the King's *grand couvert*—the evening meal at which Louis, seated alone at a raised dais, eats a dinner consisting of several dozen courses prepared and served by a legion of domestic servants, while the entire court stands respectfully and engages in courtly gossip. And when Louis XIV majestically demands some musical accompaniment, Rossellini's camera obediently follows a court functionary as he makes his way amidst the gathered nobles to communicate the King's orders to the musicians who are seated in a tiny

balcony at the rear of the long, narrow hall. At the appointed signal, the musicians pop up like so many choirboys; and the camera's perspective from the rear of the hall clearly emphasizes the churchlike atmosphere—with Louis seated at the raised altar, the focus of everyone's devotion.

Then, in a brief concluding sequence, Louis XIV is seen taking a short stroll, followed by his sycophantic retinue, in the ordered gardens of Versailles. Entering the palace, Louis momentarily withdraws to a private salon. In a scene which somewhat paradoxically recalls Brecht's famous dressing of the Pope in *Galileo*, Louis XIV removes, one by one, the numerous articles of clothing which are the outward symbols of his power. But as the gloves, sword, wig, medallion, vest, and various collars and sleevelets are removed, it is questionable whether Louis—although perhaps a tiny bit more "human"—is any the less majestic. So painstakingly has he woven the web of appearances around his person that he has now almost completely identified himself with the fabulous demigod of his public image.

The private, intimate Louis XIV—we suddenly realize—has never existed! Eating, sleeping, participating in the hunt, presiding at court, even love-making, have all been political functions: for the sake of his public image, every act of Louis's daily life—no matter how trivial—has been carefully executed with a calculated aura of serene omnipotence. Only now—when we see him *alone for the first time in the film*—can Louis allow himself a brief moment of privacy: and even here, the private Louis and the public Louis XIV are barely distinguishable.

Almost totally absorbed now in the artificial rituals of the court at Versailles, Louis XIV is also almost totally isolated from his fellow men and the real world of things. In his lofty solitude, he can only take comfort in the spiritual ruminations of La Rochefoucauld, whose book of maxims Rossellini depicts Louis as meditating over endlessly—presumably finding in their Delphic ambiguity an inspirational pastime for his godlike aloofness.

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The case has here been argued that the analysis of history in *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* is a materialist analysis and that the dramatic presentation of that analysis—its mise-en-scène—is a materialist mise-en-scène. By way of conclusion, however, it is worthwhile to examine the limitations of Rossellini's achievement and to ask why such a resolutely materialist work of art (assuming that we are justified in identifying *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* as such) should have, as it were, so little political *bite*? (One objective indication of this film's political innocuousness is the simple fact that the French national television network—for whom the film was made—went ahead and showed the film, a precedent they have certainly not followed in their dealings with other film-makers (like Godard and Marcel Ophüls, to name only two) from whom they commissioned films which were subsequently suppressed by the government and refused TV exposure.

Why is it, then, that in spite of its subtle artistry, the depth and scope of its materialist analysis, and its uncompromisingly unemotional, antimelodramatic structure, *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* is a film so easily digestible by the general bourgeois "art-film" audience? Part of the answer, of course, is simply that the opportunity to take a peek at the life of a king (and this is not just any old king) is one of the great dreams of the social-climbing bourgeoisie; this is a constant theme of bourgeois art (as well

as of tabloid journalism, which bourgeois art often resembles). Consequently, the magnetic pull of the anecdotal aspect of this film is so strong that it is very easy for the bourgeois spectator to shift the film off its basic axis—which, as I indicated at the outset is not the person of Louis XIV but rather the mechanism of power as understood and manipulated by Louis XIV—and to deal with the film on his own self-indulgent terms rather than on Rossellini's more austere and intellectually demanding terms. Moreover, *La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV* admittedly has a great deal of sumptuous spectacle to divert the spectator, and there is enough that is bizarre and extravagant (after all, Louis XIV did reach a certain zenith of the bizarre and extravagant) to titillate even the jaded bourgeois audiences who are wallowing these days in the self-indulgent decadence of Visconti and Fellini.

Nonetheless, it is the task of the serious critic to penetrate beneath the surface of spectacle and to recognize—in this film and on each of the few occasions the cinema offers him—that even spectacle can serve as a practical tool to focus our attention in directions which will produce some *useful knowledge of our objective condition* instead of merely mystifying us once again with more sugar-coated dreams that are useful only to the privileged few, who, like Louis XIV, would forever "keep us in our place."

